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Should I worry if my child is overweight?

Yes. Obesity and overweight in children is a growing problem in the United States, one that carries serious health risks and social issues. According to the Surgeon General, in 1999, 13 percent of children 6 to 11 years old were overweight, as were 14 percent of adolescents 12 to 19 years old. For adolescents, this number has tripled in the past two decades.

The causes of children being overweight or obese vary, but generally an inadequate amount of physical activity or unhealthy eating patterns, or a combination of the two, are to blame. Genetics is a factor, as well, for overweight or obese children are more likely to have overweight or obese parents. Additionally, lifestyle plays a role: fast food, television and video games have led to a nutritionally-deficient diet and sedentary lifestyle that are increasingly becoming the norm.

The risk factors and consequences that overweight children face are both immediate and long-term. Overweight children tend to feel social discrimination, leading to low self-esteem and depression, both of which are serious issues. In fact, both low self-esteem and depression can lead to lethargy and avoidance of physical activities that are necessary to combat overweight and obesity.

Health consequences for overweight children are also an issue. Some health problems include the risk of developing:

- High blood pressure;
- High cholesterol;
- Heart disease; and
- Type II diabetes.

Type II diabetes has been steadily increasing in children. Caused in part by obesity, type II diabetes is a serious health condition, one that can be prevented and controlled by diet and exercise. Because the complications of diabetes (including blindness, kidney failure and limb amputations) are, in part, related to the amount of time a person has the

condition, children who develop type II diabetes are at risk of developing complications earlier in life.

As a concerned parent, consult your pediatrician: he or she can determine if your child's weight is a health risk, and offer tips specific to your situation. As a general rule, there are plenty of ways to help your child. Try implementing the following rules into your home:

- Be positive. By supporting and accepting your child, regardless of his or her weight, you can help to boost his or her self-esteem.
- Get active. Find activities the whole family can enjoy; reduce the amount of time focused on sedentary activities; and find safe places for your child to play with other children.
- Be a role model. If you are an overweight or inactive parent, change your eating habits and lifestyle.
- Change your family's dietary habits. The best way to change eating patterns is slowly but surely: follow dietary guidelines, begin to substitute water for juice or soda; replace fatty and salty snacks with fruits, vegetables and whole-wheat crackers; limit portion sizes; and substitute low-fat ingredients in recipes.

For more information on dietary guidelines and childhood and adult obesity, visit:

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services <http://www.health.gov> (877) 696-6775

Call us for the support that you need. 1-888-290-4EAP (TDD: 1800-697-0353) or go to www.GuidanceResources.com. Agency ID: FEDSOURCE

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